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# Changing identities through collective performance at events: the case of the Redhead Days

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the (collective) performance of identities in an event context. During events, the participants not only engage in face-to-face performances, but also in the collective performances of crowds and audiences. This study analyses collective performance using Collins' framework of Interaction Ritual Chains, which combines Goffman's performance metaphor with Durkheim's work on rituals and collective effervescence. This provides a more complete analysis of the ways identities are performed and (re)constructed during an event. This qualitative study presents the case of the Redhead Days, the world's largest gathering of redheads. Visitor interviews and participant observation over four editions of the event show how a temporary majority of redheads is created, which greatly impacts both face-to-face and collective performance. Social practices that facilitate performance include photographing and storytelling. The data reveal that collective performance is inherently different from face-to-face performance, and that the combination of the two contributes to a change in narrative identities of the event attendees.

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## Introduction

According to Richards and Palmer (2010, p. 23), 'events have taken on a new meaning in post-modern society, where they become not only an essential experience in themselves, but also an important underpinning of individual and group identity'. The possibilities for identity construction in event spaces have increased enormously in the contemporary network society (Castells, 2004) as events have become nodes in new informal social networks (Richards, 2015), which allow people to connect with others and to perform chosen practices. However, the performance of identities during events remains relatively under-researched.

Goffman's concept of performance has been a growing concern of leisure and tourism studies since MacCannell's (1973, 2013) classic study of frontstage and backstage behaviour. The subsequent performance turn (Larsen, 2012; Larsen & Urry, 2011) has extended Goffman's (1959) performance metaphor to describe tourists (Edensor, 2000), encounters (Quinn, 2007), practices (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012), and places (Platt, 2011; Wilson & Moore, 2018). Moreover, leisure spaces have been described as 'stages' for performing identities (Hyde & Olesen, 2011; Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2015; Platt, 2011).

Although much has been written about performance in leisure settings, this rarely includes collective performance by crowds and audiences. Literature on performance is mostly focused on individual, face-to-face performances (Larsen, 2005; MacCannell, 1973, 2013; Quinn, 2007; Wilson

& Moore, 2018). An exception is Giovanardi et al.'s (2014) study about the Pink Night festival, which describes the collective performance of the festival. However, this study does not involve the impact of collective performance on identities of the participants.

This paper examines how events, as stages for identity performance, can be vehicles for self-change. Following Giddens (1991), identities are seen as fluid and ever-changing. Giddens (1991) argues that the self is reflexively made. Identity is therefore understood as a narrative, which is created, maintained and reshaped (Giddens, 1991). Identities are reshaped through 'doing' (Duits, 2008) and reflecting, in interaction with others. Some of these changes are conscious moments of self-change (Noy, 2004), which Giddens (1991) calls fateful moments. By regarding identities as fluid, performed and reflected upon through stories, this study analyses self-change as reported by the participants.

By including the processes of collective performance and by addressing the consequences of performance on self-change, this study bridges a gap between existing literature about leisure and tourism performance, and literature on collective identity (re)construction.

This study presents the case of the Redhead Days, the world's largest gathering of red-haired people. Every year, redheads from over 80 countries gather in the Netherlands for a three-day event to celebrate their hair colour. The event takes place in the city centre of Breda, and the programme of the event consists of several activities, such as a welcome party on Friday night and a pub crawl on Saturday night. On Saturday and Sunday there are markets with red hair beauty products, a food trucks area and a children's square. Furthermore, there is a stage with music performances and a redhead fashion show. All over the city centre there are photo booths in which the participants can have their picture taken by professional photographers. On Sunday afternoon, a collective photo shoot takes place, in which all participating redheads are photographed together.

This event is very suitable for studying the (collective) performance of identities, because it celebrates a bodily feature that the participants strongly identify with, because of the rareness and visibility of red hair. During this event, the event organisers facilitate both face-to-face and collective performance by making the visitors the main attraction.

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into (collective) identity performance, construction and re-construction in an event context. Studying these performances in detail, will lead to more insights into the processes through which identities can change as a result of event participation. The following research questions were posed: (1) How do participants (co)perform identities during the Redhead Days? (2) How does (collective) performance during the Redhead Days contribute to a change in identities?

## Literature review

The literature review first reflects on Goffman's (1959) concept of performance and its role in leisure and tourism studies. Additionally, Collins (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains is explained, which combines Goffman's micro performance with Durkheim's work on rituals, collective effervescence and symbols. This combination of theories is very applicable to event spaces, in which face-to-face performances alternate with audience and crowd interactions.

## *Leisure and tourism as performance*

The metaphor of performance has become a key focus in tourism and leisure studies in recent decades (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Edensor, 2000, 2001), starting with MacCannell's (1973, 2013) classic study based on Goffman's frontstage and backstage performances. According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, people are always metaphorically on stage, both as an actor and as audience, performing through social interaction. MacCannell (1973, 2013) describes tourism as a stage on which management and employees perform authenticity. Later, the metaphor of performance was extended to the tourists themselves, performing at destinations. This has been extensively described by Edensor (2000) in his work about tourist behaviour at the Taj Mahal.

Since then, performance has become of vital importance in analysing leisure and tourism practices (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Larsen & Urry, 2011; Platt, 2011; Quinn, 2007; Wilson & Moore, 2018). As a result of the ‘performance turn’ (Larsen, 2012; Larsen & Urry, 2011), people are seen as active participants in creating their realities, instead of passively consuming what is presented to them. Leisure and tourism practices are consequently seen as embodied and physical social practices through which social reality is constructed, reconstructed and challenged (Edensor, 2001).

### *Performance of identities*

Although the notion of performance has become an established paradigm in leisure and tourism research (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Larsen & Urry, 2011), it is only in the last decade that this has included the performance of identities (Giovanardi et al., 2014; Goulding & Saren, 2009; Hyde & Olesen, 2011; Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2015; Platt, 2011). Goffman (1959) describes an individual’s performance as the presentation of the self. However, most social scientists agree that identities are not static, but inherently fluid and actively constructed (Gergen, 1994; Giddens, 1991). This implies that within performances, people not only present their identities, but also shape and re-shape them.

According to Giddens (1991), identities are a constant work in progress, which is related to self-narratives: ‘a person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 54). Stories of the self are believed to not only provide the best insights into identities, but they actually are the core experience of personal identity (Noy, 2004). By sharing stories about themselves, people describe and construct who they are (Gergen, 1994; Giddens, 1991). This can be referred to as identity work: ‘the process whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity’ (Watson, 2009, p. 429).

Although people actively construct their identities, they are restricted by their social contexts. Elliott (2005) points out that people have a limited number of ‘plots’ they can act out. Watson (2009) describes in a similar way that self-narratives are always constructed within the limitations of the context in which the person operates. ‘The narratives people present and use, inevitably draw upon discursively available narratives “external” to us’ (Watson, 2009, p. 449). Goffman (1959) also states that people alter their performance according to the setting: specific settings define which practices and roles are appropriate.

Similarly, leisure performances are contextualised; they are shaped in interaction with a specific setting (Hyde & Olesen, 2011; Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). Leisure, tourism and event spaces often provide out-of-the-ordinary settings, away from everyday life, but within the boundaries of the new context (Edensor, 2001). This suggests that these settings can be a space in which self-narratives can be explored and changed. Out of the ordinary settings can lead to an expansion of available narratives and possible plots, which means a possibility to act out and construct different self-stories.

An example of how identities are performed and negotiated in interaction with a specific context is described by Jaimangal-Jones et al. (2015) in their study about dance cultures. Dance clubs have developed an alternative set of norms and values compared to other leisure settings (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2015). These spaces allow the participants to perform roles that are incompatible with other social contexts. Nevertheless, these dance contexts have etiquettes of their own. Some knowledge is required of the practitioners in order to benefit from these new freedoms. Jaimangal-Jones et al. (2015) make a distinction between different phases that the participants go through in their performance from the first ‘audition’ to being ‘established actors’.

### *Performance in an event context: an interaction ritual approach*

Events are generally characterised as out of the ordinary (Falassi, 1987; Goldblatt, 2011; Morgan, 2008) and limited in time and space (Getz, 1989; Richards & Palmer, 2010). The extraordinary and temporary character of events makes them promising spaces for re-constructing identities.

Moreover, the co-presence of bodies is inherent to events, leading to different forms of social interaction. Nordvall et al. (2014) distinguish three types of attendee interactions during events, which they label: known group socialisation, external socialisation and audience socialisation. This implies that during event practices, performance occurs in different social settings; face-to-face performances in a group of friends and acquaintances, face-to-face performances with strangers, and finally, performances in large groups or crowds.

Audience socialisation (Nordvall et al., 2014) is a specific characteristic of event spaces and it differs significantly from other types of interaction, because the individual becomes part of a group that co-performs. This can be seen for example, in audiences performing the wave, or collectively jumping up and down. Because of this type of crowd performance, events are often described as ritualistic (Richards, 2014; Sterchele & Saint-Blancat, 2015), leading to a state of liminality (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1967, 1979), wherein boundaries are deconstructed and blurred. To describe this type of interaction and its consequences Collins (2004) model of interaction ritual chains (Figure 1) is very suitable, because it combines Goffman's microsociology with Durkheim's work on rituals, collective effervescence and symbols which originally was the starting point for Goffman's work (Summers-Effler, 2006). Collins (2004) presents a framework that incorporates face-to-face interactions as well as ritualistic elements of events, which proves to be very useful for analysing event interactions (Richards, 2014; Simons, 2019; Sterchele, 2020).

Collins (2004) uses Goffman's key ingredients for a successful interaction ritual. Interaction rituals are performed through the body or as Collins states 'ritual is essentially a bodily process' (Collins, 2004, p. 53). Bodily co-presence makes it possible for people to read each other's signals and to become attuned to each other (Collins, 2004). Co-presence of bodies is also the fundamental aspect of events; Richards and Palmer (2010) describe events as a celebration of time and space, created for people to experience co-presence. The second ritual ingredient is 'barriers to outsiders', which stimulates a clear division between insiders and outsiders. These can be both physical and psychological barriers. The third and fourth ritual ingredients 'mutual focus of attention' and 'shared mood' reinforce each other. These ritual ingredients combined, lead to collective effervescence, a term used by Durkheim (1912) to indicate collective and shared excitement. Collective effervescence fills the practitioners with emotional energy. These emotions are not individual, but they are shared and conditioned, creating group solidarity and new standards of morality (Collins, 2004). This explains why collective performance can be used to unite a heterogeneous group of people and deeply internalise ideas, using symbols as collective representations of both the group and the actual ritual or the event.

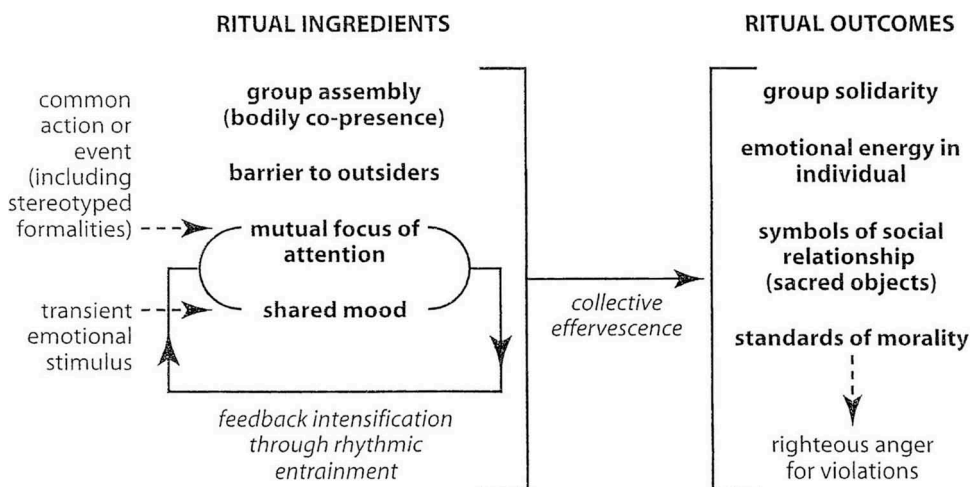


Figure 1. The interaction ritual (Collins, 2004, p. 48).

In conclusion, events are spaces in which both face-to-face and collective performances take place. These performances can be analysed using a combination of Goffman's performance approach combined with Durkheim's rituals and collective effervescence as portrayed in Collins' framework of interaction rituals chains (Figure 1). This approach makes it possible to analyse the different types of performance during events, as well as the consequences of these performances for identity construction. However, the actual workings of these processes require a detailed study of event practices and performances.

## Methods

This paper presents a case study of the Redhead Days. The Redhead Days take place in Breda, a town of 180,000 inhabitants in the south of the Netherlands. The Redhead Days have become the most international event in Breda, attracting approximately 10,000 visitors from more than 80 countries. The event originates from the idea of a Dutch artist, who advertised for red-headed models for paintings and a photo shoot, 14 years ago. He hoped he would get approximately fifteen red-haired people. Instead, 150 redheads responded, and he decided to invite them all. The first meeting was unusual, fun, and meaningful to the participants. Recognising the potential of this, the organiser decided to make it into a yearly event. During the event, which takes place in a weekend in September, the hotels in Breda are fully booked with redheads and there is even a redhead campsite.

The event was purposefully selected as an information-rich case (Patton, 1990). 'Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research' (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Since the purpose of this study is understanding (collective) performance of identities during events, an event was selected with a clear link to the participants' identities. The Redhead Days celebrate co-presence of people with a similar bodily feature, red hair, which the attendees are expected to identify with. As Jaimangal-Jones et al. (2015, p. 617) state, 'methods of visual presentation are a key means of expressing and constructing identity'.

Secondly, the case is judged information rich because the event facilitates performance of identities, by making the participants the main attraction. The program of the event allows a mix of face-to-face performances and collective performances. For example, the event includes a kick-off party in a local theatre, a redhead pub crawl and a large collective photo shoot in the park, which all involve collective performance. Furthermore, there are activities that stimulate face-to-face performances, such as a market with red hair products, speed dating, and photo shoots.

In order to study the event practices and the performances, ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews were used. Participant observation took place during four editions of the event: 1 September 2013, 5–7 September 2014, 4–6 September 2015 and 2–5 September 2016. The level of participation increased every year. In the first two years, observations were explorative and open, with participation at the periphery of the event. In the third year, all event practices were observed in detail, using an observation guide based on Collins (2004) interaction ritual chains, and with participation in almost every activity. The fourth year the focus of the observations was specifically on collective performance during the grand photo shoot and the collective walk. The observations resulted in recorded and written field notes, supported by photographic reports. To ensure the trustworthiness of the observations, a team of research assistants also undertook participant observation and wrote field notes. These additional field notes were not used in the data analysis but increase the credibility of the data through triangulation.

The interviews took place from September 2014 till March 2016. 19 red-headed visitors were selected purposefully (Patton, 1990), based on their different positions within the event practices. A diverse group of international participants was interviewed, ranging from mothers and daughters to participants who were also volunteers to models in the redhead fashion show. The informants were a mix of first-time visitors (4), second-time visitors (6) and people who visited more than two



times (9). The age of the informants ranged from 16 to 49 and ten interviewees were female and nine were male. By interviewing a diverse group of participants with various levels of inclusion, a detailed understanding of the event practices was obtained. In order to gain insights into the context of the event, additional interviews were conducted with key stakeholders of the event, such as an alderman of Breda, the president of the Breda tourist association and the organiser of the event.

Most interviews took place face-to-face after the event, either in the homes of the informants or in a public place. The international participants were interviewed during the following edition of the event or via Skype. During the interviews the informants talked about the meaning of being a redhead and the meaning of the Redhead Days, including the emotions that surrounded these themes. In order to gain insights into the (collective) performance during the event, the interview guide included topics based on Collins (2004) framework of interaction ritual chains. The informants were also asked to use photographs to further illustrate their answers. These photographs were not analysed but were meant to provide more context to the stories of the informants. All informants gave permission to use the interview data anonymously.

The field notes and the transcripts were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The first layer of key themes was based on theoretical concepts, followed by a second and third layer of codes consisting of categories that emerged from the data. For example, Collins (2004) theoretical concept of 'barriers to outsiders' was used for coding, and later specified into 'physical barriers' and 'psychological barriers', which was further specified into 'red hair as a formal and informal barrier'. To ensure an accurate reflection of the informants' intended views and meanings, the themes that emerged from the data were labelled close to the original terms, for example, the meaning of being a redhead was coded using terms from the interviews, such as 'being different' and 'the only one'. Moreover, all interpretations were checked with the original data and with the complete narrative of the respondents.

## Findings

The first section of the findings focusses on the ways in which red hair plays a role in the identities and everyday performances of the informants: what does 'being a redhead' mean? Subsequently, the 'sayings' and 'doings' of the event practices are described, with a special focus on the two practices that were identified as most important for face-to-face performances: photographing and sharing stories. A separate section of the findings deals with collective performance during the event, which is based on the collective walk through the streets of Breda and the grand collective photo shoot. The final part presents the informants' perspectives on how event participation influenced and changed their identities.

### Being a redhead

Without exception, having red hair is very meaningful to the informants. It is an unusual hair colour, which the informants call special, different and unique. Unlike other hair colours, red hair stands out and it is not possible to mingle in a crowd anonymously with red hair. This is why the informants strongly identify with their hair colour and are identified with it by others.

*'My husband always says: 'it is always easy to find you when you are in a crowd. You just look for the redhead.'*  
(Female, 47 yrs, The Netherlands)

*'When I was a young boy, I was a bit naughty, and when we did something with a group, and someone saw it, they always said: I don't know exactly who they were, but the little redhead was one of them.'* (Male, 42 yrs, USA)

The informants describe the many reactions they get to their hair colour, which are both positive and negative. Positive reactions are mostly admiring comments about the beauty of their hair.

Besides admiring comments, nearly all informants describe negative reactions to their hair colour, ranging from name-calling in the streets to being bullied and beaten at school. As Simpson and Lewis (2005) point out, standing out and being visible means being different and this can lead to marginalisation from the dominant group. For most informants the bullying took place when they attended primary school. They refer to having a very difficult time when they were young.

*'When I was a kid, I was very often beaten, every day, teachers did nothing, they were witness of what was happening but did nothing to help the kids. Because we were called things like witch, or prostitute. It was very difficult to defend yourself, ... that was quite impossible.'* (Female, 40 yrs, Belgium)

Some informants describe the bullying and teasing as being generally accepted; it is somehow normal.

*'It's almost as if redheads are the last, I can't think of the word I'm looking for ... it's okay to be picked on, it's okay to discriminate. Discrimination that is still considered okay and not bad.'* (Male, 42 yrs, USA)

Because red hair is an identifier, redheads also identify each other with this feature and feel a connection to other redheads. This connection is shown in a subtle way like by smiling at each in the streets.

*'When I walk through town and I see someone with red hair, I always smile a bit, that is a kind of connection, I don't know'.* (Female, 16 yrs, The Netherlands)

### Being a redhead at the Redhead Days

Even though the participants of the Redhead Days come from different countries and have different backgrounds, they connect with each other. Redheads arriving at the Redhead Days describe an immediate sense of inclusion. This is illustrated by one of the informants, who arrived in Breda on her own, on the evening before the event, and because of her red hair, she was instantly recognised as a participant of the Redhead Days.

*'So I was kind of tired and just wanted to get there but then I got on the bus and the bus driver already was like, now it's not that far, you don't have to pay. And I was like okay, great and then another redhead joined the bus and it was like she greeted me immediately though I didn't know her at all, but she greeted me just like that. And she also wore a Redhead Days T-Shirt like I did too and there was like – the first moment, there was like okay, this is going to be great.'* (Female, 22 yrs, Germany)

Events are described as an experience of co-presence (Richards & Palmer, 2010). In the case of the Redhead Days, the celebration of bodily co-presence is very unusual, because of the scarcity of redheads in everyday life. All informants describe the abundance of Redheads as extraordinary and special. The fact that the Redhead Days are staged in a small town like Breda, adds to this feeling.

*'yes, very special. Yes, because you just don't know ... all these people with red hair, lots of freckles everywhere. I really enjoyed seeing that'* (Male, 42 yrs, The Netherlands)

*'I think it's great that it was in Breda because it's such a small city and that ... gave you the feeling of it being your own Redhead city even more.'* (Female, 22 yrs, Germany)

The change in setting, being surrounded by other redheads, can also causes some anxiety. In everyday life, redheads have become used to standing out and being visible, but during the event this is no longer the case, leaving one of the informants wondering nervously what would be left of him if he could not be 'the funny redhead' of the group.

*'It was a huge relief to find out, that if you take that away, everyone has red hair, so that does not distinguish you anymore, that I was still liked for the rest of me.'* (Male, 42 yrs, USA)

During the event, red hair serves as a psychological barrier to outsiders (Collins, 2004). Although the event welcomes non-redheads, and even communicates that it is meant for 'redheads and



friends', the focus is on people with red hair. Most informants also state that they have no problems with non-redheads attending the festival. But still, despite the inclusive communication, insiders and outsiders are clearly distinguished by hair colour. Sometimes this barrier is strictly maintained, for example, during the collective photo shoot, which is only accessible for natural redheads. Similarly, the professional photo shoots and the fashion show are only for redheads. Other activities, like the pub crawl and the speed dating are also accessible for non-redheads.

The distinction between redheads and non-redheads also became clear during the participant observation, when observing a family being photographed by an amateur photographer. A family with three children was standing on the food square. Like all attendees, they were wearing stickers with their home country, which read 'Texas'. Two of the children were redheads and the third girl had dark brown hair. The father was a redhead and the mother had dark hair like the little girl. The family from Texas was approached by a photographer and the father posed with the two redhead children. The mother and the other girl were not photographed. This illustrates the implicit barrier between insiders and outsiders during the event. This process looked natural to all people involved, both the posing of the redheads and the moving out of the picture of the two non-redheads.

### Photographing as performance

One of the social practices during the Redhead Days is photographing, both by professional photographers, but also by amateurs. The redheads who pose for the camera, literally become the focus of attention (Figure 2), which the informants describe as unusual and pleasant and which immediately contributes to positive feelings regarding their hair colour.

*'On that day, you are the centre of attention really . . . and you are treated a bit like a work of art and that is just, well, quite special.'* (Female, 20 yrs, The Netherlands)

*'When you are always told that your red hair is ugly and at that moment everybody takes pictures of you because your red hair is actually beautiful, then you start to realise that it is not that ugly, so to speak.'* (Female, 24 yrs, The Netherlands)



Figure 2. Photographing as performance.

During the event, photographing is much more than capturing moments and images. It is a social practice in itself, with its own regulations, which evokes performances (Larsen, 2005; Larsen & Urry, 2011; Noy, 2014; Scarles, 2012). As Stylianou-Lambert (2012, p. 1822) states, 'The camera is a tool that encourages and even requires active performances related to self-identity'. The photographs are taken of all redheads, regardless of gender, age and nationality. Children are also encouraged by their parents to have their picture taken, which illustrates the out of the ordinary character of the event as opposed to everyday life, when asking someone to take a picture of their children would probably not generate such positive reactions.

*'Normally when you are walking in town and someone asks: "Can I take a picture of you?" Well, no, you tell them to go away. But on such a day, it is really normal when you ask to photograph someone: yes, of course.'* (Female, 16 yrs, The Netherlands)

Besides being a social practice during the event, the photographs taken during the event also serve as a tangible reminder of the event. Some informants have a specific photograph that reminds them of solidarity or the confidence they felt during the event.

*'One photo I like is when we all put our hands together and they were all similar, with freckles and all.'* (Female, 30 yrs, USA)

### Sharing stories as performance

Sharing stories is an important practice during the Redhead Days. It seems like sharing stories is more important than the official program of the event; the program serves as a structure, which allows people to meet and interact. According to the organiser, during one of the first editions of the event, long queues occurred when the professional photo shoots turned out to be very popular. However, the attendees did not mind queuing because of the interesting conversations they had with others. Queuing enabled face-to-face performances.

Sharing stories with strangers is enhanced by the fact that many attendees travel to the Redhead Days by themselves, because they are the only redhead in their group of friends. This large number of solo visitors stimulates external socialisation (Nordvall et al., 2014) during the event.

*'Since I travelled there alone and didn't know anybody there, I had to make some friends on my own and I actually met a lot of people ... I still am in contact with a lot of them.'* (Female, 22 yrs, Germany)

This interaction with strangers is encouraged by the organisers of the event, as observed during the participant observation. During the kick-off party, the first activity of the event, the organiser told the crowd to 'raise your hand if you came here alone', making it visible that many people came to the event by themselves. Subsequently, people were invited to share their stories with each other, or on stage.

Similar to what Noy (2004) noted in his study of backpackers, the event participants form an 'ad hoc community of storytellers' (Noy, 2004, p. 81), sharing parts of their life narratives. As Noy (2004, p. 84) describes: 'it is ... the interpersonal communication of personal narratives that grants the individual self-reflection, on simultaneously psychological and social levels'. The informants describe that sharing stories makes them feel understood during the event, especially about redhead issues. One informant described it as letting go of an emotional barrier:

*'It is very emotional to be amongst all these redheads, especially when you were bullied because of it. Your emotional barrier goes, you lose it, you cannot keep it up this weekend and then you are also open for these things.'* (Female, 36 yrs, The Netherlands)

The sharing of stories usually starts with a general topic like 'what is it like to be a redhead in your country?'. This is interesting to many of the participants, because it answers their curiosity about growing up as a redhead, which binds them together. And, as talking about travelling becomes part of the performance, travel distance becomes a distinguishing factor.

*'I met lots of South Africans. That was surprising because they came from so far away.'* (Female, 40 yrs, Belgium)

*'The lady from Polynesia travelled about 45 hours to come to Breda.'* (Male, 47 yrs, Germany)

The stories can then evolve into more personal experiences that range from superficial topics like different types of shampoo to painful memories of bullying and loneliness. Even though these topics can be painful, the sharing of these stories gives the participants a very positive feeling. As Collins (2004) emphasises, the mutual focus of attention can be painful or negative, the interaction ritual can still generate emotional energy and solidarity.

### **Collective performance: 'a giant orange wave'**

The highlight of collective performance is on Sunday, when all attendees gather at the marketplace and are addressed by the mayor of Breda and by the organiser of the event. The marketplace is filled with people with red hair. After the speeches, there is a collective walk to the city park, through the streets of Breda (Figure 3).

In the city park, all redheads gather for a large photo shoot. In 2013, the Guinness book of records validated the largest gathering of redheads in one place, when 1672 redheads were counted during the photo shoot.

The informants describe the collective photo shoot as surreal and spiritual, and they were overwhelmed by the effect it had on them.

*'You know I really didn't know I would have any emotion here, but it's really surreal to be here and be amongst this many real redheads in one place and it's really great.'* (Male, 42 yrs, USA)

*'I'm not a very spiritual person. But I suppose you could say it's quite spiritual. There's so much sharedness. It was a phenomenal experience.'* (Male, 41 yrs, UK)

The photo shoot takes about 30 minutes, in which a large crane lifts the photographer in the air, in order to take the photographs. The photographer gives directions to the redheads, for example, to wave, and to all turn or point into a certain direction (Figures 4 & 5). These directions lead to movements in the crowd. The participants describe these movements as a feeling of dizziness and as



**Figure 3.** Collective walk through the streets.

becoming one body. They feel like vanishing or disappearing into something bigger, a loss of control, resulting in a sense of unity like one big organism.

*‘And of course, you are excited, excitement everywhere. Because it is such a giant orange wave; a redhead wave ... Because you form like one body, so it is really ... just one ... and you look at the ... the ... all the colours, all the different shades. And I say in my mind ..., yes, we are all the same.’ (Female, 40 yrs, Belgium)*

*‘It’s head turning. I got dizzy. My head was spinning around in circles. I was just amazed.’ (Male, 42, USA)*

*‘Well, I would almost say “Euphoria” ’ (Female, 48 yrs, The Netherlands)*

Most informants struggle to find words to describe their feelings during these collective performances, and they describe them as surreal and spiritual. The descriptions of dizziness, while being surrounded by redheads, match what Edensor describes as a ‘sensory and physical bombardment’ leading to a destabilisation of perception which Cailliois (1961:13, as cited in Edensor, 2001) calls ‘vertigo’. This is perceived by many informants as the climax of the event, and it is in these descriptions that Durkheim’s effervescence, which was originally based on religious experiences, becomes evident.

### Vignette

In the park there is an area where only redheads are allowed. It is marked in red and white tape and it fills up with redhaired people, there must be around 1500. There is also a separate entrance for children under six, that forms a little bridge into the closed area. I stand close to the bridge, together with other non-redheads, who are watching the photo shoot. There is a large crane which first takes the Dutch minister of Internal Affairs up in the air to see the group of redheads from above. He speaks to the group. Up in the crane he takes a picture, and he waves to the redheads. They wave back at him and cheer. Then the crane goes down again, and some members of the international press go up in the crane. At the same time, the organiser of the event, goes up in a much larger crane. While he goes up, a girl comes to the microphone and asks the crowd to clap... wave... clap... wave... clap... wave, the crowd gets excited and they clap a rhythm while the large crane goes up in the air. When the crane is up, the clapping ends in an applause with people cheering.

The organiser is up in the crane with a microphone and he tells the crowd that there is a girl having her 7th birthday today. The little girl is carried into the middle of the crowd. The organiser asks five people around the girl to form a circle around her by placing their arms on each other’s shoulders. Then they all make circles around the girl. I hear the people next to me talk: ‘It is so beautiful to see all these shades of red. It is so special; you cannot dye it like that.’ The organiser, up in the crane, asks the people to sing a birthday song. The crowd sings. Spontaneously another song is sung. Everybody claps and waves. The people from the press crane call out ‘thank you’ followed by cheering again.

Then the organiser comes down and the official photographer of the Redhead Days is announced and goes up in the large crane. When she is up, she asks people to stand in a circle and move to the middle of the circle. She asks the people in the middle to look down and put their hands on each other’s shoulders. She gives directions while she takes pictures: ‘everybody look down, look to the ground, point to the middle...’. The redheads follow her directions and cheer. When she is finished there is a final applause and the crane goes down. That is the end of the photo shoot, and people start to move out of the area. From where I stand, I see hundreds of redheads pass as they make their way through the park. (fieldnotes, 7 September 2014)

Figure 4. Vignette.





Figure 5. Collective photo shoot.

### *Changing identities: red hair as a collective symbol of beauty and pride*

According to all informants a positive change occurs during and after the event. This change involves the symbolism of red hair which, as a result of the redhead days, becomes a collective symbol of beauty and pride. Because the informants identify very much with their hair colour, the changed symbolism has a direct impact on their emotions and actions.

Firstly, the narrative of being a redhead becomes more positive and explicitly includes the beauty of red hair. For many informants, before the event, red hair was associated with bullying or being singled out. During and after the event, it becomes the symbol of unique beauty. All event practices celebrate the beauty of red hair, replacing negative associations around hair colour with positive ones.

*'You feel better afterwards, because you are seen as unique and not as something negative.'* (Female, 20 yrs, The Netherlands)

*'When I came back, I was definitely prouder for being a redhead'* (Female, 30 yrs, USA)

Secondly, as a result of the event practices, the redhead narrative now includes a collective element of community and shared pride. Whereas before the event, many informants saw their hair colour as different and exclusive, often being the only redhead in a group, during and after the event, red hair becomes a symbol of inclusion into a larger community. This is directly related to identity, which is also about belonging and recognising what is different and what is shared with other people (Netto, 2008). This feeling of belonging is shared by all the informants. Several informants compare it to connecting to long-lost family members. The feeling of togetherness and belonging makes the participants act differently during the event, often to their own surprise. One of the informants describes how she felt connected to one of the other visitors, who had just shared her story on stage during the kick-off party.

*'Emotional about being in a hall full of redheads, I had to give her a hug. I normally never do that. It is not like me.'* (Female, 36, The Netherlands)

Another informant describes how he invited another attendee, who he had just met, to share his hotel room, an act of solidarity (Collins, 2004).

*'Last time I had a hotel room ... and someone did not have accommodation at the end of the first night, on the Friday, a guy ... so I said "it's okay to come and stay with me in the hotel". So he stayed overnight ... I would not normally allow anyone to stay in a hotel room, because my ... instinct is to be cautious and to be defensive in behaviour and I noticed that, and I thought that's a very unusual thing for me to do.'* (Male, 33 yrs, UK)

After the event, many participants stay connected to their newly found community by participating in online forums or via social media. In these online groups, some openly accessible and some closed, people post photographs of the event and attendees remind each other of event practices. In these virtual environments, the newly constructed symbolic meaning of red hair is emphasised.

*'We have a redhead group, a German redhead group on Facebook, we make our own Redhead Day in Germany ... Last year they met in Hamburg, and 2014 they met in Cologne, and I have been there too.'* (Male, 47 yrs, Germany)

The change in meaning of 'being a redhead' provides people with different narrative plots (Elliott, 2005) to act out. As Gergen and Gergen (1988) state, narrative identities shape action. The narrative re-construction of identities can have a direct impact on future actions and behaviour (Bruner, 1987; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Stevens, 2012). In this case, this is visible in online and offline activities that are organised by the event attendees around the newly shaped narrative about red hair being a shared symbol of beauty, pride and solidarity. The participants of the event become carriers of this new narrative, keeping it alive by emphasising red hair as a shared symbol of beauty and pride. The sense of community is not limited to the visitors of the events, but it extends to other redheads who did not visit the Redhead Days. They are informed about the event and invited to take part.

*'And today, every time I see a redhead, everywhere, I go to them and say, "You know there is a day for redhead people?"'* (Male, 47 yrs, Germany)

## Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the processes of (collective) performance in an event setting. Moreover, the emphasis was on how event practices and performances support a change in identities. Building on the distinction that Nordvall et al. (2014) made between different types of interaction during events, known group socialisation, external socialisation and audience socialisation, this study shows that these different social contexts evoke different types of performances: face-to-face performances with known group members and as well as with strangers, and collective performances in a crowd.

This study shows that collective performance is inherently different from face-to-face performance. A helpful concept to illustrate the difference between these types of performance is *visibility* (Simpson & Lewis, 2005). Face-to-face performance makes the individual participants visible, as observed in the photographing and story-sharing practices. These practices put the individuals in the spotlight and make them the focus of attention (Collins, 2004). Collective performance, on the other hand, has the opposite effect: it makes the individual participants invisible. During collective performance, the individuals disappear into the crowd, described as vanishing in 'a giant orange wave' by one of the informants. This leads to an emotional and euphoric experience of oneness, described by Durkheim (1912) as collective effervescence. As the individual participants disappear into something bigger, it is the group as a whole that becomes very visible and noteworthy for outsiders.

Participating in the event practices has led to a perceived change in identities of the participants in several ways. Many informants describe participating in the Redhead Days as a turning point



which changed them. Stories of self-change often include turning points that are unexpected and that deviate from everyday life (Noy, 2004; Ronkainen et al., 2018).

Firstly, the reported self-change is a result of a shift in symbolism around red hair from something negative into a positive symbol of beauty and pride. Throughout the event, the attendees are invited to perform a role that they do not always perform in everyday life: they embody and perform the beauty of red hair. Although red hair is a bodily character, being a redhead is not a natural identity, it is subjective and changeable. The role of the redhead is something people have learned to perform and it is constructed in interaction with available and dominant discourses. Performing this role differently, gives people the opportunity to re-define their self-narratives and broaden the possible plots (Elliott, 2005) they can act out.

Secondly, during the event, redheads form a majority and therefore, the main identifier of the attendees, red hair, becomes 'neutralised' which allows or even forces other aspects of their identities to become more exposed. This caused some anxiety for one of the informants before going to the event, but the event manages to form a safe space (Richards & Palmer, 2010), allowing the participants to act out different parts of their identities in face-to-face performances. This is also enhanced by the fact that many participants visit the event alone, so they are away from their daily social context, which opens up possibilities for exploring the self without everyday expectations and assumptions.

Thirdly, by participating in the event practices, the participants experience a sense of belonging, leading to acts of solidarity (Collins, 2004). This sense of oneness is experienced to the extreme during the collective photo shoot. Belonging is directly linked to identity (Netto, 2008) because it allows people to reflect on what is shared and what is different from others. Instead of being a symbol of exclusion, red hair becomes an inclusive symbol of social relationship (Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1912).

This study aims to open up avenues for further research regarding (collective) performance in leisure spaces. So far, in the literature, the emphasis has been on face-to-face performance. However, many leisure practices are performed collectively or by temporary communities. Including collective performance in the analysis, may reveal other aspects of the socially constructed value within these contexts. This study has revealed that collective performance involves different social processes than face-to-face performance. Moreover, Collins (2004) model of interaction ritual chains is shown to be a useful perspective for analysing the complex processes that lead to identity and community construction in event spaces.

Furthermore, this study involved an event with participants who are usually regarded a minority because of their hair colour. As Simpson and Lewis (2005, p. 1258) describe, 'to be visible and to "stand out in the crowd" is to be seen as different and hence to be isolated and marginalized from the dominant group'. This visibility is completely altered during the event, when the bodily co-presence of redheads can best be described as a *temporary majority*, for a group that in everyday life is regarded as a minority. The participants suddenly get the opportunity to be invisible within a crowd, whereas the crowd becomes visible to outsiders. This is comparable to what Johnston and Waitt (2015) describe about gay pride festivals: they are expressions of public visibility. The concepts of temporary majorities and visibility (Simpson & Lewis, 2005) are of importance for critical event studies, specifically for studying events involving minorities. They trigger practices and performances that allow for a positive self-change of the participants.

For event organisers, the concept of (collective) performance opens up possibilities for rethinking the social value of their events. By regarding events as possible stages for performance, not just for the official 'performers' but for the event participants as a whole, events can become platforms for identity creation as well as community construction. Instead of just offering a program which the audience can (passively) enjoy, event organisers can shift their role to that of designers of stages on which attendee performance can flourish. Collective performance can be facilitated by actively including moments in which the temporary majority of event attendees

becomes noticeable, stimulating collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1912) and emphasising the uniqueness of the group.

Event organisers can stimulate face-to-face performances by actively designing events as safe spaces for participants to perform and explore their identities, for example, by creating opportunities to share stories and facilitate a 'community of storytellers' (Noy, 2004, p. 81). A specific way of facilitating attendee performance is by creating photo opportunities for the participants. Photographing as a social practice allows for conscious performance, and additionally, it creates tangible proof of the performance; after the event, the photographs become a representation of the newly established symbols and of the changed self-narratives.

This research was based on a single case, which involves some limitations. The results of this study are context-bound by the very specific nature of the redhead Days. Therefore, the purpose is not to directly generalise the outcomes to other events. Instead, the focus is on theoretical generalisation. The patterns regarding collective performance, temporary majorities, visibility and changing identities that emerged from this study can be used as a lens for studying other events as well as other leisure contexts.

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